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ABSTRACT

A study aimed to examine how reading assessment information is understood and used by two powerful groups: federal legislators and members of the news media. Attempts were made to contact federal legislators on educational subcommittees to discuss how they used reading assessment information to make legislative policy decisions and to vote on education legislation. Education reporters were asked to describe their understandings and uses of reading assessment data in writing news stories. No response whatsoever was received from 25 (60%) of the legislators (United States Senators or Representatives), and only 2 legislative aides participated. This represented a participation rate of less than 5%. Only 3 of 17 education reporters participated, and 14 (82%) did not respond to repeated requests. While the response rate to repeated requests for information was low, the interview data describe: (1) five participants' varied knowledge of reading assessment; (2) the diverse types and sources of reading assessment information used by participants; and (3) how reading assessment information is used in government and the media. A central finding was the emerging narrative of a lack of response and a lack of access to legislators and reporters. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/RS)

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Legislators, Reporters, and Reading Assessment

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National Reading Research Center

READING RESEARCH REPORT NO. 31
Fall 1994

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About the National Reading Research Center

The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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Peter P. Afflerbach is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and a Principal Investigator at the National Reading Research Center at the University of Maryland College Park. Dr. Afflerbach's research interests include reading assessment that is conducted at national, state, and district levels, as well as reading assessment that is conducted by teachers in classrooms. He is the editor of a recent book on statewide reading assessment initiatives, (*Issues in statewide reading assessment*, American Institutes for Research, 1990), and the co-editor of a recent book that examines innovation in reading assessment at the classroom, district, and state levels (*Authentic assessment: Practices and possibilities*, International Reading Association, 1994). Dr. Afflerbach is also interested in the cognitive processes involved in reading and recently co-authored the book *Verbal protocols of reading: The nature of constructively responsive reading* (Erlbaum Associates, 1995). He also co-edited the forthcoming volume *Developing engaged readers in home and school communities* (Erlbaum Associates, in press), which represents the initial work of the National Reading Research Center. His publications have appeared in various journals, including *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Reading Behavior*, *Cognition and Instruction*, *Educational Assessment*, and *Elementary School Journal*. His most recent research focuses on how reading assessment information is communicated, the barriers to the implementation of statewide performance assessments, and the content validity of the 1994 NAEP reading framework.

Dr. Afflerbach serves on a variety of national and international literacy organizations. He has been a member of the Literacy Assessment Committee of the International Reading Association, and he currently serves on the Reading/Language Arts Advisory Panel of the New Standards Projects, the Content Area Experts Panel for Middle School for the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, and on the Board of Directors of the National Reading Conference.

As a faculty member of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Dr. Afflerbach regularly teaches undergraduate reading methods courses. He also teaches graduate seminars in reading assessment and the cognitive processes involved in reading. He was selected as a Lilly Foundation Fellow for the Excellence in Teaching Program at the University of Maryland, and was awarded a Ford Foundation Grant for innovation in undergraduate education when he taught at Emory University.

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Legislators, Reporters, and Reading Assessment

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Abstract. *The purpose of this study was to describe how reading assessment information is understood and used by two powerful groups: federal legislators and members of the news media. The authors attempted to contact federal legislators to discuss how they used reading assessment information to make legislative policy decisions and to vote on education legislation. They also attempted to contact education reporters to ask them to describe their understandings and uses of reading assessment data in writing news stories. While the response rate to repeated requests for information was low, the interview data describe (1) five participants' varied knowledge of reading assessment, (2) the diverse types and sources of reading assessment information used by participants, and (3) how reading assessment information is used in government and the media. The results are accompanied by a narrative of the lack of access to elected officials and the news media press that the authors encountered.*

In this report, we describe our efforts to determine how federal legislators and news reporters understand and use information about reading assessment. We focused on these two groups because of their influence on educational policy and practice and on public opinion (Bell, 1991; Kozol, 1991; McQuaid, 1989). We began this study with several assumptions about legislators, news reporters, and their work; assumptions based on knowledge we had developed as consumers of news stories, followers of educational law and policy, and readers of books and articles related to education legislation and reporting. As educators, we were familiar with news media portrayal of education and we regularly followed the work of Congress on education bills; the news media were primary sources of information.

Based on this knowledge, we assumed that legislators used reading assessment information

as a primary indicator of student and school achievement. We also assumed that this information might be used to support the framing of federal education law and to influence the passage or defeat of federal legislation related to education (General Accounting Office, 1993). We were familiar with the uses of reading assessment data in the political rhetoric surrounding the quality of schooling in the United States. For example, the federal government has published numerous high-profile documents in the past decade that contain reading assessment results describing the shortcomings of schools, teachers, and students (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), or highlighting the fact that students are not achieving to expected levels (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1994). Reading assessment results are also used in arguments for and against equity in school funding. School expenditures are compared with reading test scores to determine school goodness and the return on educational investment dollars (Kozol, 1991).

We also assumed that news reporters have particular understandings of, and uses for, reading assessment results. Information about these results that appears in news stories affects the public's perception and support of schools. For many, the media are prime sources of information about reading assessment and school success. Test scores reported in the news media also affect real estate prices and tax revenues that support schooling in particular neighborhoods and school districts (Kaplan, 1992). For many, reading achievement in schools in the United States is reified as the score from large-scale, standardized tests. This occurs despite well-documented shortcomings of the tests (Valencia & Pearson, 1987; Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991). The media play a major role in the shaping of public opinion and educational policy, as private corporations (newspapers and television stations) select issues to bring to the public's attention and work to keep these issues in the public domain (Raywid, 1984). Unfortunately, much of the newsworthy education news is bad news (McQuaid, 1989); the everyday routines and accomplishments of schools and school communities are not news at all (McGill, 1991).

Our study was informed by recent work in educational measurement that describes the importance of considering the consequential validity of test scores (Messick, 1989). In this case, we were interested in legislators' and reporters' use of reading assessment scores because their uses of reading assessment information can have considerable consequences. First, assessment results influence school funding, public support for schools, and the continuance or change of education practice; schools, teachers, students, and parents regularly experience the consequences. Second, we believe that an understanding of reading assessment is constructed (Johnston, 1992; Tittle, 1989). People understand assessment information based on their prior knowledge of, experiences with, and beliefs about reading assessment. Third, we were interested in examining the phenomenon of reading assessment becoming valid through its use: legislators and news reporters implicitly accept assessments as valid when they use reading assessment information (e.g., test scores) in drafting or voting on legislation and when writing news stories.

In summary, despite what appears to be the regular use of reading assessment information by legislators and the news media, little is known about how they understand this information, where they get it, or how they use it. Nor do we know whether legislators' and reporters' knowledge of reading assessment is current. For example, are the shortcomings of many currently used large-scale reading assessments known by reporters and legislators?

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Our initial intent was to interview a broad sample of legislators and reporters to find out how they understand and use reading assessment information. However, in the course of conducting our study, it became clear that several of our assumptions were not appropriate. First, we anticipated that a considerable number of the federal legislators on the education subcommittees of the United States Senate and the United States House of Representatives would participate in our study. We viewed legislators as public servants and individuals entrusted with the development of federal education policy. Although we knew about pork barrel voting, voting along party or interest-group lines, and voting for bills that have various and consequential riders attached to them, we thought there might be a correspondence between legislators' voting records and their knowledge of students' reading achievement in the United States as indicated by reading assessment. Second, we assumed that we could interview legislators, and we expected extensive participation from the education reporters in the news media. News reporters often report on the state of schools in the United States. The free press is considered a cornerstone of democratic society, and we believed our inquiry into the work of the education press would be acknowledged and encouraged by the news media itself. Based on our knowledge of news reporting and our experience as consumers of news information, we knew that many news stories about schools used test scores as the exclusive indicator of achievement. We wanted to determine what reporters knew about reading assessment. In summary, while we were not naive about the exigencies of collecting data from busy members of Congress and the media, we did expect that most legislators and reporters would be willing to talk with us about reading assessment. We were mistaken.

We asked the 17 senators on the Education Subcommittee of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee and the 25 members of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education to participate. Specifically, we sent up to 3 letters over an 8-month span to each senator and representative; we sent follow-up letters to legislators who did not respond to our first or second requests. The letters described the intent of our study and invited each legislator to participate in a written, telephone, or in-person interview. The initial letters of request resulted in 5 responses from 17 senators, with 2 senators indicating that their legislative aides would participate. Two additional mailings were sent to senators who did not respond. After 3 rounds of letters sent over an 8-month period, 13 of 17 senators had responded. All 13 of these senators declined to participate per-

sonally. The remaining 4 senators did not respond to any of our 3 letters.

A total of 4 of the 25 House Subcommittee members responded to our repeated requests, 1 declined, and 3 indicated that they would respond in writing to interview questions. We forwarded questionnaires to 3 House members after confirming their willingness to participate; none was returned. In all, 17 of 42 federal legislators on the congressional education committees responded to our requests for information. We received no response whatsoever from 25 (60%) of the legislators, despite our numerous requests. None of the legislators participated personally, and we obtained information about reading assessment and legislators from two legislative aides. This represents a participation rate of less than 5% (2 of 42) of the legislators (and their staffs) that we contacted.

The rate of participation of the news media personnel was also low. We contacted the chief education reporters for *Newsweek*, *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Times* and asked them to participate in interviews. In addition, reporters for four local, weekly newspapers in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area who had written stories with references to the reading achievement of students and schools or to particular reading assessment data were asked to participate. Further, the national education reporters for ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS television and the reporters for local television news affiliates (ABC, CBS, and NBC) were contacted. Our level of effort in contacting reporters was equal to that of our attempts to contact legislators: we sent 3 letters requesting reporters to participate and made follow-up telephone calls. A total of 17 media members were asked to participate, and 3 agreed to do so: the education reporters for *USA Today* and *The Washington Times*, and the education editor for *U.S. News and World Report*. Fourteen (82%) did not respond to our repeated requests.

Two senators instructed their chief education legislative aides to grant us interviews. These were the only participants who were involved in federal legislation and policy. As a result, we constructed interviews for use with the legislative aides that let us learn about how they understood and used reading assessment information and how they informed legislators. Semistructured interviews with the two aides were held in the Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. Each interview lasted from one to one and one-half hours. Interviews with news reporters were conducted by telephone in Washington, D.C. Interviews began with "grand tour" questions (Spradley, 1979) related to legislative aides' and reporters' backgrounds in education. Participants were next asked sets of questions that focused on their knowledge of education and assessment, the sources and types of reading assessment information they used, and their roles in receiving and communicating reading assessment information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the initial interview questions, we ascertained that each legislative and media participant considered reading assessment information an important indicator of school success and that each participant had used

reading assessment information to inform legislators or to write news stories. Next, participants' responses were used to build descriptions of how the legislative aides and news reporters understand and use reading assessment information (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our results are presented in three sets of related interview excerpts that describe participants' knowledge of reading assessment, the sources and types of reading assessment used by participants in their work, and participants' roles in receiving and communicating reading assessment information. Throughout the results section, we will refer to interview excerpts from participants as LA1, LA2 (legislative aides), and R1, R2, and R3 (reporters).

Participants' Knowledge of Reading Assessment

The two legislative aides informed and advised senators on current and impending issues in education, reading, and reading assessment. The aides' responsibilities also included helping senators prepare to write or vote on education bills and to respond to constituent mail. Prior to discussing reading assessment, one aide described an important choice that many legislators make related to the education expertise of their staff:

> LA2: Some elected officials do have experts in education on their staffs . . . they're not politicians so to speak . . . they have subject area expertise . . . that's one way for a senator or congressman to choose his staff . . . but there are always tradeoffs . . . because people who are experts in education sometimes may not be good at the legislative process . . . and the legislative process is a science of sorts.

The two senators made clearly different choices in employing the legislative aides that worked most closely with them on educational issues. One aide gave the following overview of her experiences related to issues in reading assessment:

> LA1: I am working on the completion of my Ph.D. in special education . . . and I think some of the societal issues related to reading assessment are . . . the whole accountability and assessment issue and what's going to happen with that . . . but I think with most assessments that we have got a long way to go . . . to take into account different populations . . . particularly people with disabilities . . . I'm talking about people that are from diverse backgrounds and not necessarily mainstream . . . so I think the assessment community has much to do.

The second legislative aide described her background and her lack of familiarity with reading assessment, then noted that her expertise was as a politician and not as an educator:

> LA2: I'm an expert on government and politics . . . that's my background . . . I'm not an expert on education . . . but what I do is look at information that comes from so-called experts and I try to build coalitions from that . . . I make judgments based on that . . . .

We also asked news reporters about their familiarity with reading, reading assessment, and education. Like the legislative aides, reporters' responses indicated varied knowl-

edge about reading and reading assessment. A reporter for a national newspaper told us:

R1: I wish I knew more about how exactly the reading assessment is done today and I don't remember that much about how it was done when I was at school . . . I can't remember . . . I have a bad memory for those things . . . I don't think it's changed a whole lot.

When asked to describe his knowledge of current reading assessment practice, the reporter told us:

R1: I guess you could translate what I did (as a student) . . . a book report into a performance-based assessment . . . it might have a different name but it's basically the same thing: did you read it? Did you understand what you read?

Another news reporter told us:

R3: I'm not really familiar with assessment in the local schools . . . no . . . I'm really not . . . if you mean like the Iowa Basic Skills Test . . . or the California Achievement Test . . . I did a story in the past year I guess . . . on testing . . . and tests and the extent to which they have become . . . the story was on political correctness in tests . . . we talked about how testing companies are now under the gun to make sure that all minorities are mentioned in their test questions . . . fair representation . . . eliminating any perceived bias by race or gender.

The second reporter provided a clear contrast in knowledge when discussing reading assessments and their relationship to what is taught and learned in school. He also stated a belief that many currently used reading assessments actually impede students' attainment of higher levels of literacy:

R2: Obviously reading is fundamental to literacy . . . human beings distinguish themselves by their ability to use symbols and language . . . so that if one is able to read at a high level . . . one is more literate and one is able to manipulate the signs and symbols of a culture more effectively . . . it's those sort of more higher—more sophisticated symbols that represent the higher levels of literacy that are implied or needed by today's new economy . . . so reading at high levels . . . reading with intelligence . . . reading with comprehension . . . reading with subtlety . . . the ability to manipulate written language and to read is crucial . . . traditionally, we have taught very low levels of reading to most students and we have tested kids . . . our expectations as conveyed through tests have been very low, too . . . we have simplistic tests of reading skills which discourage . . . in turn . . . teachers from teaching high-level skills.

This reporter was the only participant in our study who reported critically evaluating the reading assessment information he received and used. We later determined that this reporter had recently received the International Reading Association Print Media Award, which is given for "quality reporting on literacy in the print media" (International Reading Association, 1992).

In summary, participants' knowledge of reading assessment varied widely. Only one reporter appeared conversant in the area of reading assessment; he adopted a critical per-

spective and noted the potential shortcomings of current assessments. The other reporters did not report bringing this critical perspective to reading assessment. In fact, these reporters considered reading assessment unchanged since they were students (for the two reporters a range of 30–40 years ago), considered performance assessment the equivalent of a book report, or noted outright their lack of familiarity with large-scale reading assessment. The legislative aides also varied in their familiarity with reading assessment. One was pursuing a doctorate in special education and listed her concerns with reading assessment as practiced in the United States with different student populations. The other aide told us that her expertise was as a politician, not as someone who knew reading assessment. Three of the five participants did not demonstrate high levels of familiarity with the nature of reading assessments used in school or with the questions about reliability and validity that accompany the use of these assessments. In addition, these participants did not appear to possess a level of knowledge that would allow them to be critical consumers or users of reading assessment information.

Sources and Types of Reading Assessment Information Used

We next asked participants to describe the sources and types of reading assessment information they used. The legislative aides described two in-house sources of information: the General Accounting Office and the Congressional Research Service.

LA1: The Congressional Research Service . . . will send back little blue highlighted books that say "these are the major issue areas in reading assessment" . . . it might say, "these are the major players" . . . "this is the major organization" . . . another one is the GAO . . . they do excellent investigations into that kind of thing . . . the other way is they hear from congressional briefings and hearings . . . big players in the field . . . and also if a major bill is coming up then various agencies such as DOE may report on particular programs . . . the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) is used frequently.

The aide suggested that there are subject matter experts working in the General Accounting Office and the Congressional Research Service. However, it was not clear what criteria these experts used to determine valid and important reading assessment information. The aides did tell us that both groups regularly used the reading assessment scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The second legislative aide told us that test scores and teacher testimony were also important sources of reading assessment information and added that employers' assessments of workers' reading ability are a crucial form of reading assessment.

LA2: Test scores would be objective kinds for that . . . testimony from teachers and so forth . . . frankly the employer community is going to be more important in making judgments . . . that would be more subjective data . . . if you can't hire somebody because they're functionally illiterate . . . obviously, employers are the consumers of the educational system.

Both legislative aides told us that constituents' letters, telephone calls, and other communications related to how well schools are teaching reading can influence the legislative process:

LA1: Tons and tons of letters . . . unbelievable numbers of phone calls . . . while that is most often not the major initial learning, it oftentimes reinforces what they (senators) may have learned somewhere else.

LA2: I listen to what our state tells us: what our school boards tell us . . . what our PTAs tell us.

News reporters also cited a variety of sources for reading assessment information. The sources included government reports, NAEP scores, discussions with educators, and visits to schools. One reporter listed the following sources for reading assessment information:

R1: There's the primary focus given us by the NAEP . . . we pay attention to the reports that come out from the federal government . . . from the Education Department, from the NAEP . . . from the Center for the Study of Reading in Illinois, and occasionally we get some on the state level . . . at various times we talk with people around the country . . . being a national newspaper we usually deal with federal people on a regular basis.

Another reporter told us:

R3: NAEP results and the federally funded government studies . . . I work for the national staff . . . that means my responsibilities are to write about national educational trends . . . I do a little bit of getting out into the local schools . . . I don't get out as much as I should . . . I think that's a problem many education reporters have . . . I do go out into the classrooms periodically . . . that's at least once . . . maybe twice a year to see what's going on . . . I've talked with state school superintendents . . . chief state school officers . . . for instance I would call Bill H. in California . . . get his perspective on whatever the issue is we're talkin[illegible]ut . . . and let's not overlook the federal bureaucracy because the federal bureaucracy is one of my responsibilities.

The education reporter who recently received a print media award told us:

R2: I visit schools on a regular basis . . . I talk with people who visit schools . . . I look at a wide range of published indicators . . . test scores . . . reports . . . and quantitative and qualitative measures of performance.

Legislative aides and reporters described diverse types and sources of reading assessment information. The legislative aides used compilations of reading assessment information produced by government agencies. In each case, the General Accounting Office or Congressional Research Office gathered information from education and research reports, policy statements, and news items and then combined them into condensed packages of information that were sent on request to legislators and their aides. The emphasis here appeared to be on large-scale, government-sponsored assessment: the NAEP results were the most frequently mentioned type and source of reading assessment information. Next, aides

considered this information along with other information (e.g., constituent letters, aides' personal experiences, presentations and testimony given to Congress, feedback from businesses and schools) to develop a perspective on how schools and students were doing in reading.

Two of the news reporters depended largely on reading assessment information from federal and state education agencies. One reporter regularly visited schools, and he cited this as an important source of information about reading assessment. Teachers and students were not a common source of information for the other two reporters. While the participants described a wide range of sources and types of reading assessment information, it was not clear if any source was considered more or less valid. It was clear that visiting schools and observing teachers and students is an uncommon practice, while dependence on government figures and reports is common. We note that none of the participants who used NAEP results—the most commonly used indicator of student reading achievement—indicated an awareness of the alleged shortcomings of NAEP, including the criticism that the process used to set achievement levels is "fundamentally flawed" (National Academy of Education, 1993).

Communicating Reading Assessment Information

We next asked participants about their roles in communicating reading assessment. The legislative aides described quite similar roles in communicating reading assessment to senators, despite their very different backgrounds and familiarity with reading assessment. Each aide synthesized diverse sources of reading assessment information and then communicated the information to the legislator. The first aide told us:

> LA1: I synthesize information coming in from many sources . . . identify positions of major groups . . . and help them to develop positions for the senator . . . there's so much information coming in from everywhere that senators rely on their staff people to know—have at their fingertips . . . what's this group? What was their position? and What do my constituents think? and Give me the pros and cons of doing this.

The second aide told us:

> LA2: What the Department of Education tells us . . . what universities and scholars tell us . . . what testing results tell us . . . put that all into the mix and then I'll make some recommendations to the senator about how we should utilize that information. I try to synthesize reading assessment for him . . . obviously, they're interested in aggregate outcomes . . . how U.S. kids are performing . . . whether reading lessons are going up or down.

While we identified different types of assessment information, we were not able to ascertain the weight or importance that legislative aides placed on particular types of assessment information prior to communicating it to their senators. For example, we do not know whether feedback from constituents related to school quality was considered more important than

NAEP reading achievement scores. Nor could we find out whether the weight given to each type of assessment information might change across a legislator's tenure in office or across the life of a particular education bill.

Reporters told us they communicated reading assessment information by writing stories to keep the public informed about how well students and schools were doing. A reporter told us:

> R1: Communities want to know whether they're getting their dollar's worth out of their schools . . . that usually translates into the accountability provided by test scores.

Another reporter told us of a similar set of goals:

> R3: So I take it as one of my responsibilities to point out the nature of the system and why it works or doesn't work.

Both of these reporters maintained an almost exclusive reliance on standardized, large-scale reading assessments to determine whether or not schools were "working." A third reporter, who was also concerned with school accountability, reported what he considered an important role of the education media:

> R2: The public needs to know about the performance of the public schools . . . they need to know in particular about the low expectations for students in school . . . they need to know that there are very few incentives for teachers to improve their performance . . . they need to know that the measures that are often used to quantify the performance of the schools are themselves unreliable.

We note again that the above reporter was the only participant who demonstrated a rigorous consideration of the quality of reading assessment information. This reporter possessed knowledge of the possible limitations of reading assessment, specifically in terms of validity and reliability; he felt it was important for the public to know about student and school achievement as measured by reading assessment and about the merits or limitations of reading assessment itself.

The reporters clearly considered keeping the public informed about student and school achievement the priority that guided their communication of reading assessment information. Two of the three reporters approached this challenge with the belief that large-scale reading test scores were valid indicators of school and student achievement. One reporter told us that reading assessment itself should be scrutinized, as schools often are by reporters using reading assessment information. No other participants indicated this level of understanding of the issues related to reading assessment. The legislative aides portrayed their own roles as synthesizers of diverse types and sources of reading assessment information who could inform legislators involved in drafting and voting on legislation.

Participants' Suggestions for Informing and Influencing Legislation

Given our difficulty in getting responses from legislators, we wanted to know whether our

experience was typical and how we might use this experience to learn more about access to elected public servants. Neither legislative aide was encouraging about our chances of having a personal meeting with legislators. Both legislative aides stated their belief that brief, written communication was the best format for communicating research findings, recommendations, and opinion to legislators:

LA1: Many, many times nothing past the first page is read . . . and oftentimes that other page won't even be turned . . . it just won't be turned . . . so even if you are sacrificing something important you've only got one page . . . it's better to have something read than nothing . . . I'd make it as concise and succinct as you can and I'd blanket them all with it . . . particularly the subcommittee and committee that you are dealing with.

The second aide told us:

LA2: You should not underestimate the number of people who want to see senators and to a lesser extent the number of people who want to see their staffs . . . so . . . it's not too much of an exaggeration to say that a senator could break up his entire working day into five-minute blocks and still not see everybody who wanted to see him . . . what they have to do is simply make judgments about how they use their time . . . what I would suggest if you want to do this . . . you have to give a reason for agreeing to see you . . . you either have some information for them . . . you're a constituent . . . you have expertise that would be of interest to them . . . you have an idea that you want to share . . . . Do you see what I'm saying?

Both aides described a situation in which it is difficult (or not possible) to meet with or contact a United States Senator. The aides also suggested that being a constituent of a particular senator or representative might help gain access. However, we found that this was not the case.

Rate of Participation and Lack of Access

Over the course of eight months of seeking the participation of legislators and reporters, it became increasingly evident that the participation rate in our study would be low. We are confident that the low rate is not for our want of trying to engage legislators and reporters. In fact, *we considered the emerging narrative of a lack of response and a lack of access to legislators and reporters as a central and important finding of our investigation*. In this section, we detail some of the experiences we had in trying to contact potential participants. The legislators and reporters who declined participation but did respond to our request cited full schedules as the reason they could not participate. We asked one legislative aide about the disturbingly low rate of participation—or even acknowledgment by the 25 legislators who did not acknowledge receiving our request and the 40 legislators who would not participate at any level. The legislative aide responded:

LA2: To be perfectly honest, you're low on the list of priorities because you're not a constituent . . . this is an extraneous activity . . . in other words . . . you're not giving them information . . . you're here trying to get

> information; senators, congressmen, and their staffs are generally in the business of obtaining information and not in giving it out . . . so this is not . . . a preferred use of their time . . . so that's probably why . . . you know there's nothing in it for them . . . basically . . . to sit down with you to answer those questions . . . so that's probably why you got a fairly low response . . . I would not say at all that it's because of a disinterest in the topic.

The other legislative aide told us that senators and their staffs are overworked and that the sheer amount of mail they receive may have influenced the response rate. Three of the senators on the Education Subcommittee told us (through telephone conversations with their legislative aides) that we should talk to our own senators. These senators had no time for us because we were not their constituents, but both of the senators from the state in which we live told us they had no time to participate either. One senator (who *is not* on the Education Subcommittee of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee) told us that we should seek participation from the members of the United States Congress who serve on education committees. The other senator (who *is a* member of the Education Subcommittee of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee) told us that she did not have time to participate.

We conclude this section with anecdotes gathered during the eight months this study was being conducted. Given our lack of success in getting responses from many of the potential participants and the low rate of participation among all possible participants, we provide the anecdotes as context that might help the reader understand our experiences and frustrations. First, four of the senators on the Education Subcommittee of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee who had no time to participate in this study did have time to make cameo appearances in a movie that was being filmed at the same time this study was being conducted. The movie is a comedy about an impersonator who becomes president. In the movie, the four senators give interviews about the importance of jobs for United States citizens. Second, on a pledge of anonymity, a legislative aide to one United States senator told us that to get participation from the senator, we needed one of three things:

> You have to be in a district where votes are needed; you have to have a favor owed you; or you have to be an old friend.

Third, one legislative aide told us that our final report might be welcomed by the representative she worked for:

> He would be much more interested in the outcome of your research than the process of your research.

It was not clear if the aide or legislator was aware that participating in the process would influence the outcome. Finally, one senator on the education subcommittee who did not respond to our first two mailings eventually sent us a two-page letter on the importance of school choice for parents and students: a matter not related to our request.

We were equally concerned with the low participation rate of the news media. A reporter for the best-selling local newspaper with a

large national circulation responded to our request for an interview about reading and reading assessment by telling us that "she needed more details to get permission." The reporter wanted to know if she would remain anonymous and if any quotes taken from her stories would be anonymous. She also asked, "Will *The Washington Post* be named?" Later in the year, the same reporter wrote an article on the state school achievement standards in Maryland with the headline, "P.G. Schools Lagging, State Says." The first paragraph of the article read:

> Prince George's County made minimal progress last year towards improving its poor performance on state school achievement standards, according to an assessment released yesterday.

Later in the same article, the reporter noted:

> A significant part of the data in the new report was made useless for gauging whether schools got better last year, however, because the education department changed the way it reported scores for ninth-grade competence tests. ("P.G. Schools," November 17, 1993).

We were not sure why this information was not used to temper the headline, for "useless" data do not provide strong support for the headline that introduced the story.

The media members who did participate in our study told us that busy schedules prevented many reporters from agreeing to interviews such as ours. To further examine possible reasons for the low rate of participation of reporters, we turned to recent investigations of the quality and the status of education reporting (McQuaid, 1989). Education reporting is not given high status in the hierarchy of news reporting, and many education stories are written through desk assignment, that is, the available reporter gets the assignment, regardless of familiarity with the topic (Bell, 1991; Kaplan, 1992). In media circles, the education beat is generally not considered a privileged assignment (McQuaid, 1989). Reporting on education stories has been used for training novice journalists (Raywid, 1984), and education reporting is often viewed as a stepping stone to other, more prestigious areas such as political reporting (McGill, 1991). Perhaps some reporters were wary of granting interviews because they envisioned a situation in which their knowledge of reading assessment might be scrutinized. Mass media aversion to criticism was noted by Lazarsfeld (1948):

> If there is any one institutional disease to which the media of mass communication seem particularly subject, it is a nervous reaction to criticism. As a student of the mass media I have been continually struck and occasionally puzzled by this reaction, for it is the media themselves which so vigorously defend principles guaranteeing the right to criticize (cited in Bell, 1991; p. 115)

We are concerned that the press which in our experience has focused on the failure of schools in the United States while claiming to be keeping the public informed and the schools accountable, by and large ignored our requests to participate in this study. While we have limited interview data to support it, we believe that reporters' lack of knowledge about reading

assessment may contribute to their reluctance to participate in interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limited participation rate, we feel our experiences during this study provide two sets of important information. First, the study provides the beginning of a description of how legislative aides and news reporters receive and understand reading assessment data as well as an initial understanding of how reading assessment is valued and used by these two powerful groups in United States society. We examined participants' familiarity with reading assessment and found diverse levels of knowledge: two of five participants appeared prepared to critically examine reading assessment information before using it. We have some confidence that these two participants might influence policy and public opinion from a perspective informed by knowledge of current and developing reading assessment. However, we are concerned that the other participants have less than expert knowledge of the types of reading assessment, the limits of particular assessments, and the potential influences of assessment results on reading instruction and learning. This means that reading assessment information that has considerable consequences for schools, teachers, and students is used by legislative aides and news reporters in a noncritical manner. The assessment information is assumed to be valid and is used without question.

Participants used a wide range of types of reading assessment from a variety of sources in performing their jobs. There was often a dependence on government agencies and the reports they generated. Large-scale assessment results were widely used, as was a network of state and federal officers to provide reading assessment information. Much of the information provided to the two members of Congress whose aides we worked with was synthesized from sources by legislative research offices. Legislative aides received information from the research offices, considered it accurate, and used it. The aides informed us that legislative aides acted in the role of expert. We assume that their advice and information related to reading assessment was used by legislators as such. In contrast, other reading assessment (such as that occurring regularly in schools) was rarely mentioned as an important source of information. Only one participant, the award-winning reporter, regularly observed classes and talked with teachers and students. The participants told us of two reasons for communicating reading assessment information: to inform policy and to inform the public. While both of these communications may have considerable consequences for teachers, students, and schools, the expertise of people who communicate the information is questionable.

Most of the participants in this study operated from a base of received knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). That is, whatever they were given to be reading assessment results and information, the majority considered valid. They were not critical consumers of reading assessment information, and they received and forwarded information rather than passing it through a critical filter of knowledge. And yet, the participants are in politically powerful positions

with potentially strong influence on educational policy, opinion, and practice. Most did not even appear to know the critical issues related to reading assessment.

Our results suggest the need to carefully examine this question: If participants are not experts in reading assessment and not in a position to critically evaluate reading assessment information, how can they adequately inform policy and practice? The discourse and vocabulary of reading achievement is monopolized by standardized test scores, and alternatives to this limited view of student and school literacy achievement are not considered. The lack of critical knowledge related to reading assessment contributes to a culture of usership and not a culture of improvement and evolution. Most of the participants in this study appeared content with the status quo in reading assessment: they used the reading assessment information from large-scale tests that is produced and valued by the government. Other sources of information included the constituents of elected officials and state and federal bureaucrats. The chances for changing the status quo are impoverished under these conditions, as are the opportunities for introducing reading assessment that might be an improvement (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991). This reification of large-scale testing as reading assessment may contribute to an inability to consider alternatives (Shannon, 1992).

Our second conclusion draws from our decided lack of access to what is supposed to be a representative government and a free press. Few of the powerful people we contacted responded to our requests to discuss their knowledge and practices related to reading assessment. Each of the potential participants in this study received three letters of request in which the purpose of our study was stated, as was our flexibility for holding interviews in person, by mail, or by telephone. While none participated personally and 60% did not even respond to our requests, the legislators are employees of the citizens of the United States. We assumed that elected officials would at the very least respond to our requests. This was not the case. News reporters often cite the maintenance of a free press as one of the cornerstones of a free society. Yet, most reporters did not acknowledge receipt of our requests and did not participate in a discussion of reading assessment. "Accountability" is a word commonly used in political rhetoric and news reporting related to schools and education. But, when we inquired about the practices of those calling for accountability, the vast majority apparently did not feel accountable enough to even respond to our request—a telling commentary on those in power.

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